THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

A Blossom In The Desert

December 1, 1996
John M. Buchanan

Eternal God,
through long generations you prepared a way
for the coming of your Son,
and by your Spirit
you still bring light to illumine our paths.
Renew us in faith and hope
that we may welcome Christ to rule our thoughts
and claim our love,
as Lord of lords and King of kings,
to whom be glory always. Amen.

Book of Common Worship
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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A BLOSSOM IN THE DESERT

DECEMBER 1, 1996
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, CHICAGO
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
SCRIPTURE
MARK 13:24-37
ISAIAH 35:1-10

"The Wilderness and the dry land shall be
glad and the desert shall rejoice and blossom."
Isaiah 35:1

Among all the carols of Christmas, I have always loved '*Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*' and I have loved the poetry of Isaiah which also promises that when God comes, "the desert shall rejoice and blossom."

Earlier this autumn, I was given a gift which became for me a symbol of sorts of the great Advent theme of God's coming and the desert blossoming.

We were in Santiago, Chile. As Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I was visiting with the leaders of three different Presbyterian denominations : the National Presbyterian Church of Chile, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Chile, and the Christian Presbyterian Church of Chile. It is an important moment in Chilean history. After the overthrow of the elected government of Salvador Allende in 1973, and the imposition of military rule by General Pinochet, Chile endured years of authoritarian rule and oppression with very little by way of personal freedom, and freedom of conscience – which we Calvinists know is at the very heart of political liberty. Presbyterians don't get along well with dictators of the right or the left.

The little Chilean Presbyterian Church survived the long night, the restrictions on the ability to function freely, the questioning, the detention and the occasional disappearance of critics of the dictatorship. Finally, the military dictatorship, responding to international pressure, restored democracy.

This time, Chilean leaders are determined to write into the Chilean constitution the basis of personal and political liberty – freedom of religion. Finally, all the churches, including the very powerful Roman Catholic hierarchy, which for years has been opposed to any such measure, are supportive. And one of the resources to which Chilean political leaders are looking as they move toward this remarkable step is the tiny Presbyterian Community, a church whose theology and history and tradition is deeply rooted in the concepts of personal liberty, individual autonomy and the sanctity of individual conscience. One of the consultants working with the Chilean

National Assembly is an American Presbyterian, an attorney, Lee Iverson, who our church has assigned to the Presbyterian Church of Chile for just this purpose.

It is an important moment and the Chilean Presbyterians know it, and the three separate denominations are moving toward reunion in order better to serve their country and their people at this critical time. That is why I was there: to encourage them to put differences aside and join forces and come together as one church.

On the last evening of our visit, just prior to the Assembly at which the critical vote would be taken and at which I would speak, we had a meeting with leaders from the three denominations. It was cordial and hopeful. And at the end, one of the Chilean pastors, the Stated Clerk of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Manuel Gajardo, a pastor from the rural north of Chile, rose and asked me to come forward for a presentation. He gave me a large photograph, carefully wrapped, of a beautiful bright red flower, *mano leon* -- "hand of the lion" – which, he explained, grows only in the dry desert of Northern Chile. He wanted the Moderator to have the picture because of what it meant. "Look," he said, "at how small that flower is and how dry everything is all around it." And then, his voice breaking with emotion, he said, "That is my church, my church that will now disappear into a larger denomination. And that bright flower, changing the dryness of the desert around it, is the new Presbyterian Church of Chile."

> "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
> The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus,
> it shall blossom abundantly," Isaiah promised.

What a treasure that ancient poem is. Distinguished scholar Walter Brueggemann calls it "a lyrical affirmation of the transforming of history and creation wrought by the coming of God." Did you year the radical promises? The desert will blossom – and those who are overwhelmed by their own incapacities, weakness, disabilities – those with weak hands and feeble knees (and who among us doesn't know what that means?) are going to be strengthened and given courage. And not only that, the eyes of the blind will be opened, the deaf will hear, the dumb speak and the lame will leap like deer and there will be water in the desert. "Don't apologize for the lyrical abandonment," advises Brueggemann. "The poem is a healing alternative to the church's grim despair and to our modern sense that no real newness is possible. The text invites us out of our managed rationality to affirm that God does what this world thinks is not possible." [*Texts for Preaching*, pages 20-21]

That is the perennial dilemma of Christian churches and thoughtful Christians on the first Sunday of Advent. We are preparing to affirm and celebrate the most incredible idea the world has ever heard: that God, the creator of all, the mystery behind all mysteries, the ground of our being and source of our hope, has come in history and furthermore comes into our lives, and that coming of God, that presence of the divine in our lives – in our relationships – in our world – changes everything. Our dilemma is that what we have to say has a hard time being heard, because there is so much noise and so much activity going on all around us. Sometimes we who know what the word is, and who come here to hear it again, sometimes even we have a little trouble really hearing it, really hearing the promise of transformation.

That's the cue for the preacher to have at the sinful materialism and economic excess of secular Christmas. You know, you can't hear *Silent Night, Holy Night*, because the trombone player on the corner is blaring *Jingle Bells*. You can't hear cattle lowing because of the Peruvian band. You can't receive the gift of God's love in the Christ child because you're too busy spending money and worrying about the size of your VISA bill.

The church's challenge and the challenge for each of us on this special Sunday, this blessed breathing space at the end of Thanksgiving weekend and before the serious and arduous business of Christmas commences, is to hear the promise – a promise of profound transformation, that because of a birth in Bethlehem of Judea, something of humanity's deepest longing is answered; something of our own deepest hunger is fed; something of our personal thirst is quenched. When God comes, history, creation, and we, become different, with new, hopeful possibilities.

You could miss that part. Many people do. When Jesus is asked about the coming of God, he will not be pinned down. He will not say how or when it will happen. All he will say is … "be awake, be alert, be awake." Three times! He knows, apparently, that we need the reminder.

And so the word to you and me on this is – pay attention! You can miss that small flower blooming in the desert if you hurry too fast. You could miss hearing angels sing in all the other noise of Christmas. You could miss the healing of love if you are too absorbed in the commercial clutter of an American Christmas.

"The desert will blossom," the prophet promised. But Jesus warned: "You must be alert and awake. You must listen and watch carefully."

You know, I think the reason we miss it sometimes is that we are overwhelmed – overwhelmed by the season itself and all the extraordinary demands it will place on us emotionally and physically, not to mention financially. There is so very much to do in the four weeks ahead of us: greeting cards, gifts, parties, travel. And sometimes we miss it because we are overwhelmed by what's going on in our own life – the chaos of our relationships, the frightening uncertainty of our job, the dull ache of grief that will not go away regardless of how cheerful we force ourselves to be, the depressing lack of time to do and be what we want to do and be because we are so busy and so committed.

And sometimes, like the people in Isaiah's promise, we are overwhelmed by our sense of incapacity. We simply can't do what others expect of us and what we have come to expect of ourselves. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by factors over which we have no control, but which limit our capacity to live fully and joyfully.

Did you notice that Cardinal Bernardin, as he confronted that final limitation over which he had no control, placed a nativity scene in his home where he could see it from his bed, and then intentionally completed the task of signing and sending his Christmas cards to remind his friends, to remind himself, possibly, that the desert will blossom, weak hands and feeble knees will be strengthened?

It is the most amazing idea of all: that God comes into your life and transforms it and brings, by the power of love itself, newness, hope, joy.

As I was thinking about those wonderful images in Isaiah's ancient poem; flowers in the desert, the blind seeing, the lame leaping, the weak and feeble and fearful suddenly courageous and strong, I encountered a piece of writing which captured it. It is in a book about writing by Anne Lamott, in a chapter about watching and listening carefully. It is, I think, a lesson for Advent. The author was asked to write an article on the Special Olympics, and so she attended and watched and wrote:

> Things tend to go very, very slowly at the Special Olympics. The last track-and-field event before lunch was a twenty-five yard race run by some unusually handicapped runners and walkers, many of whom seemed completely confused. The race took just about forever. And here it was, nearly noon, and we were all so hungry. Finally, though, everyone crossed over the line, and those of us in the stands got up to go – when we noticed that way down the track, four or five yards from the starting line, was another runner.
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> She was a girl of about 16 with a normal-looking face above a wrecked and emaciated body. She was on metal crutches, and she was just plugging along, one tiny step after another, moving one crutch forward two or three inches, then moving a leg, then moving the other crutch two or three inches, then moving the other leg. It was excruciating. Plus, I was starving to death. Inside I was going, 'come on, come on, come on', swabbing at my forehead with anxiety, while she kept taking these two or three-inch steps forward. What felt like four hours later, she crossed the finish line, and you could see that she was absolutely stoked, in a shy, girlish way.
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> A tall African-American man with no front teeth fell into step with me as I left the bleachers to go look for some lunch. He tugged on the sleeve of my sweater, and I looked up at him, and he handed me a Polaroid someone had taken of him and his friends that day.
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> Look at us, he said. His speech was difficult to understand, thick and slow as a warped record. His two friends in the picture had Down Syndrome. All three of them looked extremely pleased with themselves. I admired the picture and then handed it back to him. He stopped, so I stopped too. He pointed to his own image. That, he said, is one cool man.
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> After lunch, I wandered over to the auditorium, where it turned out a men's basketball game was in progress. The African-American man with no front teeth was the star of the game. You could tell that he was because even though no one had made a basket yet, his teammates almost always passed him the ball. Even the people on the other team passed him the ball a lot. In lieu of any scoring, the men

stampeded in slow motion up and down the court, dribbling the ball thunderously. I had never heard such a loud game. It was all sort of crazily beautiful.

The auditorium bleachers were packed. Then a few minutes later, still with no score on the board, the tall black man dribbled slowly from one end of the court to the other, and heaved the ball up into the air, and it dropped into the basket. The crowd roared, and all the men on both teams looked up wide-eyed at the hoop, as if it had just burst into flames. Anne Lamont, Bird by Bird, Some Instructions on Writing and Life, p. 40-43.

> "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
> the desert shall rejoice and blossom ...
> they shall see the Glory of the Lord ...
> the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
> the ears of the deaf unstopped,
> the lame shall leap like a deer
> and the tongues of the speechless
> sing for joy."

The promise is that it will happen. God will come. May that be your experience in the days of Advent.

Watch – Listen – Be Awake.

Amen.